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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: MUCH SPECULATION, LITTLE PUBLICALLY-AVAILABLE  
EVIDENCE IN DEATH OF KOMMERSANT JOURNALIST

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) The March 2 death of veteran Kommersant military correspondent Ivan Safronov has sent shock waves through Moscow's journalistic community. Investigations by the Prosecutor General's office and the Kommersant staff have to date produced no serious evidence that would point to suicide, forced suicide, murder, or accident as the cause. Against the background of the murder in October 2006 of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, the radiation poisoning of ex-FSB agent Aleksandr Litvinenko, and other, contract-style killings of Russian journalists over the last several years, some have been inclined to assume the worst in this case. The response of the Kommersant editorial staff, however, has been more measured. While reflexively rejecting suicide as a possibility --they point to Safronov's excellent work and family relationships and his relatively good health-- the newspaper has been pursuing all other possibilities. Colleagues aver that Safronov, a retired military officer, maintained good relations with his former colleagues, although they acknowledge that there were the inevitable collisions with the notoriously secretive MOD. Autopsy and toxicology tests, due to be released March 7, may shed some initial light on the circumstances surrounding the reporter's untimely end. End summary.

Circumstances of Death  
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¶2. (U) The March 2 death of Kommersant military correspondent Ivan Safronov has left colleagues at the newspaper and law enforcement officials struggling to produce an explanation that matches the facts as they are presently known. Safronov plunged to his death from the fifth floor of the building where he lived in a third-floor apartment at about 3:00 P.M. local time. Neighbors in the building report hearing no noise in the stairwell in the minutes preceding his fall. Colleagues and members of Safronov's family were reportedly not aware of any extenuating circumstances --family, work, health-- that could have served as a proximate cause for suicide. To a person, they reject the suggestion that Safronov, who they described as funny, irreverent, full-of-life, could have taken his own life.

Uncharacteristically Subdued Before Death  
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¶3. (SBU) An investigation by Kommersant staff, undertaken immediately after news of Safronov's death became known, has to date produced no evidence to support any one version of

what may have happened. A March 6 Kommersant article published a record of phone calls made and received by Safronov March 1 - 2 and journalists interviewed his interlocutors. A few noted that the journalist seemed uncharacteristically subdued in the last days before his death. Also interviewed were colleagues who attended the February 17 - 20 Abu Dhabi airshow with Safronov. They reported that Safronov had complained of an ulcer, and had stopped joining them for evening meals because of the discomfort it was causing him. Safronov's doctor told Kommersant that the journalist was being successfully treated for the ulcer at the time he died.

¶4. (SBU) The Prosecutor General's office has opened an investigation into Safronov's death under a criminal code article covering forced suicide. Investigators to date have established that the external injuries on the corpse are consistent with those sustained during a fall. The results of the autopsy and toxicology tests are to be released March 7.

#### Friction with Authorities in Past

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¶5. (C) While all note that Safronov in the past had published material that had made the authorities unhappy, and that his death, as Kommersant Deputy Editor Ilya Bulavinov reported, "could have been violent and connected with his professional activities," they acknowledged that there is no reason, at present, to assume foul play. (Safronov has had criminal investigations for revealing state secrets opened against him in the past, although none of them have resulted in charges being filed. In the weeks before his death, according to Kommersant, Safronov was reportedly writing an article about the sale of Su-30 aircraft and S-300B (Zenit) air defense missiles to Syria via Belarus. Kommersant reported

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separately that Safronov had not submitted the article before his death.)

#### Strong Family, Professional Ties

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¶6. (C) In a March 6 conversation, Kommersant Deputy Editor Azer Mursaliev was careful not to exclude the possibility of foul play, but said he found the evidence offered to date unconvincing. Safronov had been subdued but, Mursaliev allowed, that happened to him from time to time. He noted that Safronov had strong family ties. His daughter was expecting a child, and the journalist was looking forward to becoming a grandfather. His son was soon to graduate from school and enter an institute. Their relations were excellent, as was Safronov's relationship with his wife. The journalist was much loved at work, and had the complete support of the newspaper's editorial staff.

#### Death an Accident?

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¶7. (C) Mursaliev did not exclude the possibility that the cause of Safronov's death had been an accident. He posited that the journalist may have ascended to the fifth floor to close a hallway window in the Khrushchev-era building and fallen to his death in the process of attempting to accomplish that task in the aging, poorly-maintained building. There had been no evidence of a struggle on the landing, Mursaliev said, and none of the building's occupants had heard anything at the time that Safronov plunged to his death. (Safronov, Mursaliev said, was a "big guy" and would not have gone easily had he been attacked.) Safronov had shown every sign of intending to return to his apartment. He had purchased a bag of mandarins, which were left, undisturbed, on the landing from which he fell, and he had promised to return a phone call from a colleague after 3:00 P.M.

¶8. (C) Mursaliev said there were no security cameras at the entrance to the building, as had been the case at the apartment where murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya lived. He had been told that Safronov's footprints had been found on the landing's windowsill and were being analyzed by investigators.

Not Anti-Kremlin  
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¶9. (C) Mursaliev rejected allegations in some of the Western media that Safronov was an opponent of the Russian government. "He was simply a superb investigative reporter," he said. Although the journalist had problems with some in the MOD, he maintained excellent working relations with many in the active-duty military. His easy manner and military background made it easy for him to find a common language with military counterparts, Mursaliev said.

Foul Play?  
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¶10. (C) In a March 7 conversation a very emotional Natalya Gevorkyan, who had worked for Kommersant until January 2007 and was close to Safronov, joined Mursaliev in excluding suicide as a possibility. Unlike Mursaliev, Gevorkyan was more inclined to see the death as the result of foul play, although she was unable to supply a concrete motive. She suggested, without proof, that "someone" had compiled a hit list, that included Politkovskaya, Litvinenko, Safronov, and perhaps others, or that Safronov had acquired information the publication of which could pose problems for someone influential. The Kommersant staff in the course of its own investigation had made a thorough search of Safronov's computer files and materials both at his home and office, and had found nothing that aroused suspicion, she said. They also, she added, had not found a draft of the Syria arms transfer article allegedly promised to Kommerant by Safronov.

¶11. (C) Gevorkyan had joined much of the Kommersant staff, many uniformed and non-uniformed military officers, and friends in paying their paying their last respects to Safronov at the morgue on March 7. She said that Safronov's face showed no sign that he had been beaten. Near the coffin were large wreaths from Boris Berezovskiy and the Presidential Administration Press Service. The burial took place at a cemetery on the outskirts of Moscow.

Good MOD Ties  
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¶12. (C) Center for Extreme Journalism Head Oleg Panfilov told us March 6 that Safronov, whom he had known for two years, was incapable of suicide, and he could find no convincing explanation for the journalist's death. Panfilov had witnessed at close hand Safronov's easy working relationship with MOD contacts. Citing Litvinenko, he noted that those in organizations like the military and the FSB tend to react very strongly to any sign of betrayal by one of their own. Panfilov had not seen or heard any sign that Safronov had been excluded from the military fraternity before his death. Embassy Cooperation with Safronov  
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¶13. (C) As military correspondent for Kommersant, Safronov covered joint U.S.-Russian military exercises. He also covered space launches and international air shows. Unlike many military correspondents with good MOD contacts, Safronov did not shy from contacts with the Embassy, and was frank about his dissatisfaction with the MOD team assembled by former Minister Sergey Ivanov. (In the wake of Safronov's death, rumors have circulated that Safronov had compiled a dossier of compromising materials on Ivanov.)

¶14. (C) The Embassy's cooperation with Safronov ended with the 2005 Torgau exercises in Grafenwohr when, as a reporter embedded in a Russian unit, he disclosed conflict between the Russian and U.S. contingents over the conduct of the exercise, which resulted in a decision by the exercise's Russian and U.S. commanders to end his participation in the exercise. When Embaffs last saw Safronov on December 6, 2006, he expressed his regret that we no longer closely cooperated with him and seemed bitter and alienated.

#### Biographical Details

¶15. (U) Safronov was born in 1956. He graduated from the Military Academy of Rocket Forces and served in the Far East, after which he returned to Moscow, where he served in the Air Space Forces' press division. After retiring from the military, Safronov joined Kommersant, where he worked for the last ten years of his life.

#### Comment

¶16. (C) As his colleagues at Kommersant note, Safronov was not an uncompromising critic of the Kremlin like Anna Politkovskaya or ex-FSB agenda Aleksandr Litvinenko. His articles about defense matters were meticulously researched and well-sourced, and he generally refrained from the speculation and unsubstantiated allegations that mar the work of others here. It should come as no surprise that Safronov's colleagues across the board deny the possibility of suicide, and it is the case that the current, difficult circumstances in which journalists work have made many reflexively inclined to assume the worst about the causes of Safronov's death, but there is simply too little information available at the present to draw conclusions that can withstand scrutiny. Embassy will continue to attentively follow the investigation.

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